

IF

YOU DARE...

TURN THE
PAGE AND GET
AN EYEFUL OF

AWFUL



... DR. ORLOF, THAT IS!

MORPHO DARLING



**M! goes
to the
MOVIES**

By Timothy Paxton
with Betsy Burger & David Todarello

Sex and monsters – what an irresistible combination! What's considered commonplace in today's horror productions – nudity intertwined with gore – was something studios wouldn't (or couldn't) dare attempt thirty-plus years ago. While it's true that there was an underlying sexual tension to Hollywood's movie monsters' "relationship" with their leading ladies, these passions were never consummated. It wasn't until the late 60s that this tradition of cinematic dry-humping came to a climax with the introduction of outright nudity. Through the breakthrough efforts of arthouse auteurs such as Roger Vadim and his star Brigitte Bardot, among others, audiences on both continents were prepared for the next phase, and the industry's exploitation exponents were only too willing to oblige.

The European and American approaches to making this new type of film were markedly different. American nudie cuties (designed for adult male entertainment, not thought provocation) were light-headed, whimsical and stuffed-to-the-gills with bouncing breasts and jiggling bottoms. Horror clichés were grafted onto these bawdy, slap and tickle features. These misplaced elements served more as comedy props than mood or atmosphere enhancers, where American filmmakers missed the boat in attempting to blend the sensual and the surreal, the Europeans excelled.

Sadly, thanks to U.S. censors, other well-known Euro-Erotic-tinged horror films were released here sans various "improper" scenes of sexual improprieties (lesbian references, nudity, striptease sequences and so forth). A broader release guaranteed larger box office receipts, so integrity be damned.

Possibly the best example of the European sex and monster film comes from a director who has had his hand in the proverbial honey pot for over thirty years: Jesús Franco. Despite heavy criticism from many in the cinematic circle, his films reflect a man obsessed with the dark details of the human condition. He especially delights in those desires which entangle scientific experimentation with eroticism. In one of Franco's earliest works, **GRITOS EN LA NOCHE/THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF** (1961), the seed for the creature feature-cum-sexy shocker genre was planted. Having seen this film, along with others made during his early career (notably, **MISS MUERTE/THE DIABOLICAL DR. Z**, 1965), a serious chronicler of Franco's product, and erotic horror altogether, can understand why his later projects, excessive as they had become, succeeded in delivering the explicit goods. No one can deny that his 70s efforts **LA COMTESSE NOIRE/LOVES OF IRINA** (1973), **CHRISTINA PRINCESSE DE L'ÉROTISME/VIRGIN AMONG THE LIVING DEAD** (1971, the uncensored edition), and **VAMPYROS LESBOS-ERBIN DES DRACULA**™/The Lesbian Vampires-Heir-

esses of Dracula" (1970) are, without a doubt, the best erotic horror could ever hope to offer. They present the subject in a deliciously raw form, yet are embodied with a sense of wonder and beauty. By watching **THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF** the viewer can be a witness to the very beginnings of Franco's erotic mythos.

The English-language export of the film was believed lost until Mike Vraney of Something Very Video and American director Frank Henenlotter (**BASKET CASE**, 1982; **FRANKENHOOKER**, 1990; **BRAIN DAMAGE**, 1988) discovered a copy in a derelict warehouse. After months of preparation, the release of this "Sexy Shocker" in 1993 is without a doubt the most important find in the English-speaking world of erotic horror and monsterdom (even more so than the rediscovery of Fritz Böttger's 1959 classic **EIN TOTER HING IM NETZ/HORRORS OF SPIDER ISLAND**). It's well known that Franco didn't come up with the surgical-horror element which he has so often exploited. Rather, Georges Franju's marvelous **LES YEUX SANS VISAGE/EYES WITHOUT A FACE** (1959) was primary in depicting very graphic facial reconstruction scenes. This said, Franco took the theme and made it his own, adding an *exploitive* eroticism (nudity and a salivating monster).

The film opens: it is a damp summer night in the Hartog region: circa 1912, and a young woman stumbles drunkenly down a dimly lit alley to her apartment. She fumbles with the lock on the door, enters, and begins to undress. Suddenly, from her bedroom wardrobe a tall man with bulging dark eyes emerges and attacks her. She screams and the intruder jerks towards her like some sort of automaton. He strikes, grabbing the struggling woman, and biting her on the neck. Abruptly her screams cease. The monster picks up his lifeless prize and hurries out of the building. Once outside, the tapping of a gentleman's cane guides the *blind* creature and his spoils down a dark alley. The girl is never to be seen again. She is the fifth victim of the mad Dr. Orlof (Howard Vernon) and his robotic assistant, Morpho Lautner (Ricardo Valle).

The police are justifiably baffled by the mysterious disappearances, and the case is handed over to the befuddled detective Edger Tanner (Conrado San Martín). While he puzzles over the lack of clues, another woman is about to be abducted. At a local burlesque club, Dr. Orlof captures the attention of a voluptuous singer, Dany (María Silva). "I'm fascinated by your flesh," Orlof whispers as he strokes her cheek, "So soft and fresh. So smooth..." He adorns her with a jewel-encrusted necklace and offers her a ride home to his chateau (an abandoned mansion) for a nightcap and some hanky-panky. The carriage arrives at its destination and Orlof lets

the woman run into the house, locking the door behind her. Once inside Morpho brutally hunts her down – chasing the hysterical woman from room to room and using the shrieks to guide him to his prey. He violently pins the struggling beauty against a wall and savagely rips into her tender, exposed throat. Another fresh corpse is ready for Orlof's vile experiments. This ferocious prelude sets the tone for the remainder of the production.

Dr. Orlof was once a mild-mannered prison surgeon who fell in love with Arnes (the stunning Perla Cristal), a female prisoner in his care. Faking her death by inducing insulin shock, he smuggled her out of prison and made her his lover and assistant. Realizing that he may need muscle for some of his latter forays into experimentation, Orlof also wrote a death certificate for Morpho, a psychotic murderer who was scheduled for execution. After a little selective surgery Morpho is transformed into an obedient robot whose heightened sense of hearing more than makes up for his grotesque blindness. When Orlof's young daughter Melissa (seductive Diana Lorys under make-up) is scarred in a fire and goes into a coma, the scientist sets off on a mission of surgical madness.

But why does Orlof hunt beautiful, lustful young tarts? The reason is very simple: they are plentiful in the burlesque district, and who would miss one or two of the wanton females anyway? Besides, the kidnapped women also happen to look a lot like Orlof's daughter. This fact drives the scientist to use the skin and flesh of the recently murdered women in a vain attempt to surgically reconstruct the disfigured face of his beloved Melissa (who lies comatose in a glass tomb in her father's crypt-cum-laboratory). Aided by Arnes, each attempt to restore Melissa's former beauty and consciousness is met with disaster: the young woman gurgles into consciousness and then collapses, ugly as ever, as her body rejects the transplants.

Detective Tanner is still puzzling over the case, and it seems that the only person with a clue is his girlfriend Wanda Bronsky (Lorys, out of make-up), who, by the way, is a shapely singer/ballet dancer and a dead ringer for Orlof's Melissa. Meanwhile, Orlof decides that the operations are a failure because he uses dead tissue, and the hunt is on for living flesh. Orlof, dressed in his fetching top hat, cane, and cane get-up, attempts to lure Wanda into his clutches. She spots him and dodges the madman. Not to be disappointed, Orlof then surprises another sexy nightclub singer, killing her piano partner in the process. Morpho attacks the blonde, and almost kills her in his frenzy. The monster



Suddenly, Dany (María Silva) realizes she's all alone in an empty house with a monster...

reluctantly gives up his prize, and the woman's face is unmarred by the attack. A smile creases Orlof's naturally dour expression; now that he has a live woman, he can successfully restore Melissa.

The duo cart the woman back to the lab, and Orlof prepares her for surgery. He picks up a scalpel and (in a beautifully tracked shot), guides the blade towards the prone woman. Orlof doesn't hesitate to guide the blade down the side of her face, past the nape of her neck, and between the cleavage of her firm breasts (incidentally, this scene was cut from the US release, but remains intact in the French edition¹). The operation is another failure, but Orlof decides to keep the barely conscious woman as his prisoner. "We'll keep her alive," Orlof sneers to Arnes, "we may have need of her later." Why he may need her is not expanded upon, but Morpho doesn't seem too unhappy about the decision.

With the scientist's latest obsession, Wanda, fresh on his mind, Orlof continually talks about future operations. This discussion leads to tension between Orlof and Arnes, and there's an altercation in the lab.

Sick of all the killings, Arnes refuses to help Orlof any further, and threatens to expose him to the police if he doesn't cease his research. The choice between his work and the woman isn't a tough one for the scientist, and Orlof kills her. As Orlof examines the dead Arnes, Morpho, perhaps hearing the two argue, stumbles into the room moaning. Arnes lays the body just a few feet away and Orlof has to think fast. Orlof speaks in a soft, drippy tone to his assistant, telling him about the next hunt. Morpho listens to his master's carnal plans, and the distraction is complete. The monster wanders away, and the scientist prepares for the final operation...

To help her boyfriend with the investigation, Wanda gathers evidence on her own, and decides to trap the killer herself. The discovery of Dany's necklace near Orlof's hideaway prompts Tanner into action. While Tanner methodically tracks Orlof, Wanda manages to get intentionally picked up by the madman at a local club. Orlof knocks Wanda out with a drug and takes the woman home to prepare her for the ultimate experiment. Meanwhile, as Orlof readies the

chemicals and machines, Wanda manages to escape from her room. She wanders through the house and discovers the mutilated (and quite alive) victim #7. Naturally she screams, and this attracts Morpho's keen attention. What follows is a wild chase through the house where the blind man eventually corners her in Orlof's lab. However, before any surgery can commence, Morpho discovers the dead body of Arnes unceremoniously stuffed in a closet in the lab. Whimpering in grief, the bug-eyed creature attacks and murders his benefactor. The struggle between man and monster interrupts the delicate experiment in progress and Melissa spasms and dies. Morpho then scoops up the unconscious Wanda and takes her to the roof of the building (all monsters have an instinctive urge to do this sort of thing). Tanner and a fellow detective arrive on the scene just in time to shoot Morpho. The monster drops Wanda, stumbles about and, after being shot twice more, falls from the roof to his death. The two lovers are reunited.

The lack of actual nude scenes in the US production doesn't hinder the total sexuality of the picture as a whole; there are enough randy



OUCH! The fiendish shape known as Morpho (Ricardo Valle) gives Dany the fatal hickey from Hell!

goings-on to definitely tag this as a sexy shocker. Morpho's attack on the women borders on a sexual frenzy, and each encounter is a psychotic's attempt to rape and devour his victim. Framing these scenes is Franco's keen use of cinematography — swooping shots, odd angles, and deep shadows — accompanied by a jittery organ, pipe, and xylophone soundtrack supplied by J. Pagán, A. Ramírez, and the director himself. This clamor is very effective, and at times acts as "Morpho's theme," highlighting the creature's tracking the smell of female. Odd whistles and squeals punctuate the grotesque close-ups of the pasty-faced Morpho captured in the elation of the hunt.

The director's use of various sexual juxtapositions within the film is fresh and a little deviant. Even though Orloff is able to channel Morpho's psychotic urges into stalking women, the creature has a need for human kindness, which, oddly, comes in the form of a cuddle from Arnes. One touching scene occurs after Morpho pursues and subdues victim #6. The blind man is exhausted and collapses on his bed. Arnes enters his room to comfort him, whereupon Morpho

moans pitifully. "He's been mistreating you, Morpho," she says taking the misshapen monster in her arms and stroking his jet black hair. "I know you're afraid, but you must not be. He is just a man. A man who will die someday like all mortals." Orloff has command over Arnes ("I own you!"), and uses her as his assistant. Orloff loves his oblivious daughter, Morpho loves Arnes, and the woman comforts both men... it's a bizarre arrangement. The monster has deep feelings about his victims as well. After knocking Wanda out with chloroform, Orloff instructs Morpho to take her to Melissa's room for safekeeping. There Morpho sits on the bed next to the unconscious girl, his hands running up and down her supple body. Perhaps he is building an image of her in his mind for various perverted reasons, or maybe he is realizing how closely she resembles Melissa. Whatever the reason, this scene goes on uncomfortably long, and Franco plays it for all its creepiness. When Wanda later attempts to escape, Morpho chases her down and subdues her in Orloff's lab; his hands are constantly all over her breasts and body.

While the dance numbers lack the overtly erotic air of later Franco works² there are still enough scantily dressed females in the nightclub scenes to keep any pervert happy. Although the film is based on the (no doubt nonexistent) "novel" by Franco (under his pseudonym David Kuhne), it is heavily influenced by mystery author Edgar Wallace. The name "Orloff" — this time with two "f"s — comes from a character in the 1940 Walter Summers British production of Wallace's "The Testament of Gordon Stuart," **THE DARK EYES OF LONDON/THE HUMAN MONSTER**. This Dr. Orloff (played by Bela Lugosi) also employs a blind giant to kill his victims as part of an insurance scam (this film was later remade in 1961 by Alfred Vohrer as **DIE TOTEN AUGEN VON LONDON/THE DEAD EYES OF LONDON**). So enamored with the character and his mystique, Franco has "Orloff" appear in many of his later productions even if only by name: **THE DIABOLICAL DR. Z, EL SECRETO DEL DOCTOR ORLOFF/DR. ORLOFF'S MONSTER** (1963), **THE LOVES OF IRINA, LA VENGANZA DEL DOCTOR MABUSE** ("The Vengeance of Doctor Mabuse"

(1970), **EL HUNDIMIENTO DE LAS CASA USHER/REVENGE IN THE HOUSE OF USHER** (1983), **LES PRÉDATEURS DE LA NUIT/FACELESS** (1988, with Howard Vernon in cameo!) and so forth.

Howard Vernon stars as Dr. Orlof, and, since that time, has been a frequent Franco attraction. His appearances have been varied: Dracula in **DRÁCULA CONTRA FRANKENSTEIN/THE SCREAMING DEAD** (1971), the vicious Count Zeroff in **LA COMTESSE PERVERSE**/"The Perverted Countess" (1973), and the confused Dr. Usher in **REVENGE IN THE HOUSE OF USHER**, to name but a few. Anyone interested in Vernon's work (and Franco for that matter) should read the interview with the actor in the book **OBSESSION - THE FILMS OF JESS FRANCO** published by Selbstverlag Frank Trebbin, Germany (also available from co-editor/author Tim Lucas of **VIDEO WATCHDOG** magazine), and in **EUROPEAN TRASH CINEMA** number five.

One wonders why **THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF** wasn't hailed as a triumph of horror upon its initial release. There are three possible reasons. One, the film is a horror story and features a monster and screaming women — elements usually considered too exploitive and therefore seen as "bad taste" by critics. Second, in the U.S., most foreign films are seen as too highbrow or too clumsy to sell a lot of tickets. This is true even today when foreign productions are relegated to the limited arthouse circuit or direct-to-video release. The final reason is that the film probably wasn't distributed too well. Taking the first two reasons into account, **THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF** played a few second bills and then disappeared, with limited TV runs until the mid-70s. However, now that the film has been given a second chance (and maybe even a third if Franco has his way), it can be seen as the masterpiece it is.

As an annotation to this review, Franco's **REVENGE IN THE HOUSE OF USHER** is a

moody quasi-sequel to **THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF** featuring an aging and confused Orlof and an equally long-in-the-tooth (and very talkative) Morpho. In a slightly altered flashback, Orlof leaves Hartog with Morpho and Melissa when his experimentation gains the attention of the local law. Stealing away to a lonely castle in the French Alps, the doctor is able to restore Melissa's face, although she remains comatose! Despite a series of half-successful blood transfusions from Orlof's personal kennel of chained peasant women, it's Morpho's dedication to Melissa which finally brings her back to the land of the living ... just in time for the roof of the crypt to collapse on the cringing couple. The film is full of potential, but lacks definition of plot and character. The flashback scenes look as if they were struck from a master negative, and the rumors that Franco was shopping around for a 1993 re-release of **THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF** only makes one's mouth water. It's a pity no one has the nerve to put the film out —uncut, subtitled, and widescreen— on laserdisc⁸.



The awful Dr. Orlof (Howard Vernon) orders Morpho to dispose of another heavenly body...

FOOTNOTES:

1. It's a common practice worldwide to release alternate versions of "finished" films; there is a domestic version, which is then edited and reconstructed for export. There is another excised nude sequence, this time with Morpho and Wanda. During the final chase through Orlof's home, Morpho uncovers Wanda's ample bosom (or, to be more specific, a body-double, since Lorys reportedly didn't want to expose herself).

2. In the American export variation of **MISS MUERTE** (the only version of this film available) the near-nudity of actress Estella Blain and her full-body fish net "Miss Muertes" costume still takes the breath away. In his **VAMPYROS LESBOS**, the sad-eyed Soledad Miranada has a bizarre sexual stage act with live actors and mannequins.

3. However, there is a beautiful print available from Redemption Video. Their English-dubbed release of the film is letterboxed.

CREDITS:

GRITOS EN LA NOCHE

["Cries in the Night"] *French* *t-* L'HORRIBLE DOCTEUR ORLOF ["The Horrible Doctor Orlof"]. *US* *t-* THE AWFUL DR. ORLOF. Spain/France, 1961. *p* co- Hispaner (Madrid)/Eurociné (Paris). *d-* Jeff Franco [= Jesús Franco]. *sc-* Jesús Franco, based on a novel by David Khunne [= Jesús Franco]. *ph-* Godofredo Pacheco, as *ph-* Javier Pérez Zofio. *art d-* Antonio Simot. *ed-* Alfonso Santacana. *m-* J. Pagán, A. Ramírez Angel. *ad m-* Jesús Franco. *c-* María del Carmen Martínez Román. *as d-* Alfredo Hurtado. *p-* Sergio Newman (Spain) and Marius Lesœur [= Leo Lax] (France). *cast-* Howard Vernon, Sam Martín [= Conrado San Martín], Diana Lorys, Perla Cristal, Mary Silvers [= María Silva], Richard Valley [= Ricardo Valle], Mara Lasso, Venancio Muro, Félix Dafaue, Faustino Cornejo, Manuel Vázquez, Juan A. Riquelme, Elena María Tejero, Jesús Franco (night club pianist). Widescreen. B&W. *rt-* 95 min (Spain), 90 min (France), 88 min (US).



Dr. Orlof assures Morpho that their nightly stalkings will continue until they find the right woman... for the final, fiendish experiment!

SHE WANTS YOU

STORY AND
ART BY
GARY DUMM
JOE ZABEL



